II: Castle in Context? Redefining the Significance of Beeston Castle, Cheshire

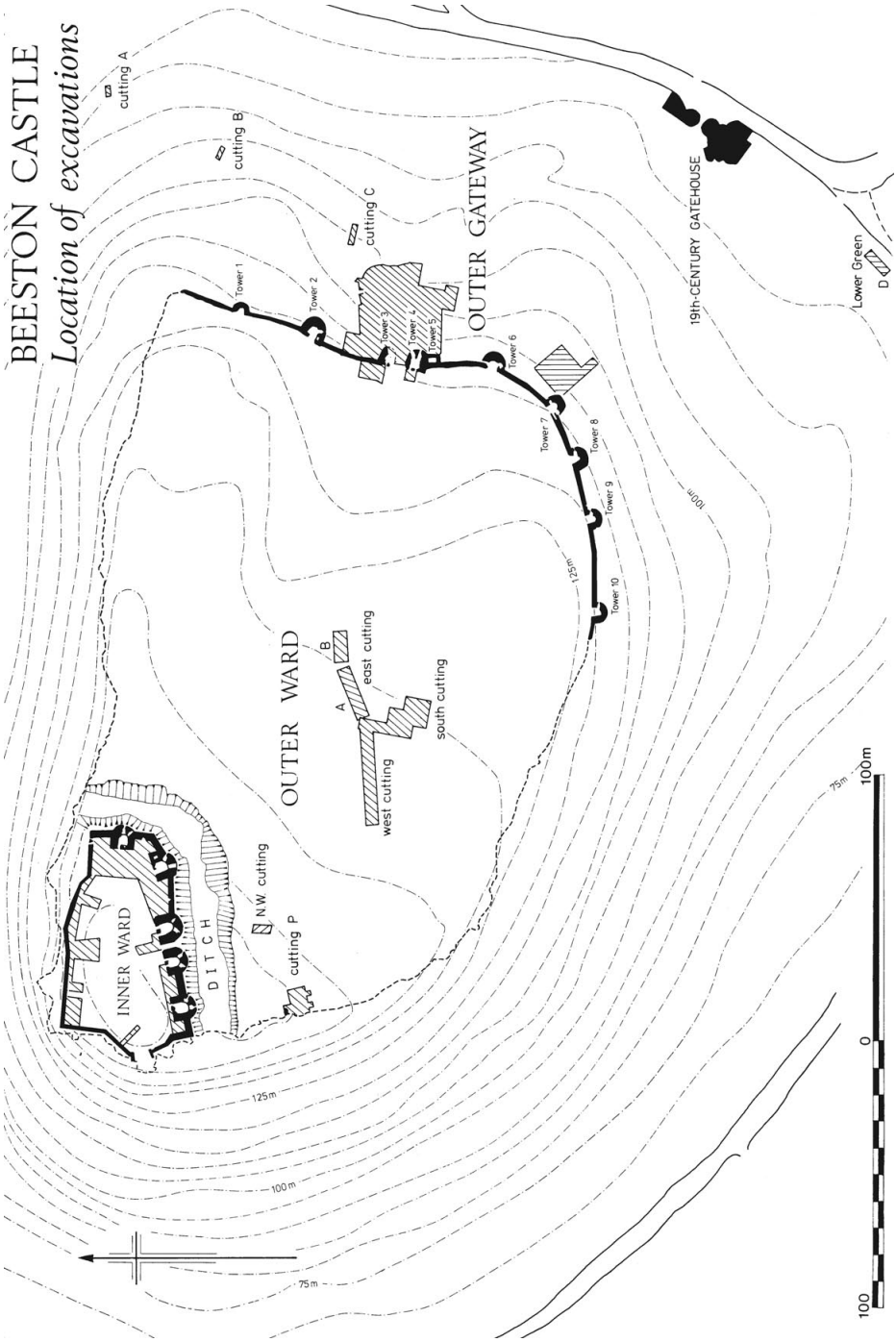
by Rachel McGuicken

Beeston castle, Cheshire, is an historically significant site for a number of reasons, not least for the continuity of activity on site spanning millennia. However, this perceived significance can be interpreted only after placing it in a broader context. Interpretation is the study of a resource, the aim being to establish that resource's meaning, relevance and place in history, thereby highlighting the individuality and distinctiveness of a monument. The study of a castle in its landscape is a relative newcomer to castle studies, and interpretation has only recently started to look at the broader picture in these terms. An appreciation of the wider impact of power in the landscape by Beeston castle's builder, Ranulf de Blundeville, opens many doors as to Beeston castle's significance, and indeed, its existence in its immediate landscape.

Introduction

It has been believed that Ranulf, sixth earl of Chester, and first earl of Lincoln (1170–1232), later known from perhaps the late 14th century as 'de Blundeville' (Eales 2004, 56), used innovative ideas for the design of his castle at Beeston (SJ53805922), copied from Middle-Eastern fortifications encountered during his earlier Crusade (1218–1220). These were characterised by the abandonment of the donjon or keep, hilltop sites and vast rock-cut ditches (Allen Brown 1984, 7). The castle is sited 10 miles east of Chester, overlooking the surrounding Cheshire Plain on a 107 metres high hill, which forms part of the sandstone mid-Cheshire Ridge. The castle, which was commenced in 1225, was planned in two parts: an Inner Bailey sited on the highest point, with a high, precipitous natural defence to the north and a rock-cut ditch to the south, and an Outer Bailey with walls, towers and gatehouse following the contours of the natural scarp, as well as a prehistoric rampart. The plan of the castle, therefore, was influenced by existing earthworks and by the topography (Ill.II.1).

There is evidence of timber constructions within the Bailey (Ellis 1993, 108), and significantly, Pennant, in his work *The Journey from Chester to London* of 1782, observed that, 'Within the yard is a rectangular building, the chapel of the place' (Pennant 1782, 74). Despite this, however, the seemingly absent interior features suggests that the use of Beeston castle was limited (Ellis 1993, 104), and although there are documentary references to further building works in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, no evidence of a



IIII.II.1: Plan of Beeston castle. © English Heritage NMR

hall or kitchen has been found, and the castle was never completed. Despite the apparent absence of many of the buildings necessary for the castle to function as an administrative centre and residence, enough accommodation was provided by small halls and chambers in the gatehouses and by chambers in at least two of the towers in the Inner Bailey, for the basic requirements of the constable and the visiting earl, his officials and guests (Ellis 1993, 101). From remaining architectural and archaeological evidence, it would appear that the castle's purpose was offensive and defensive, as well as, to some extent, residential. Although the limitation of the latter calls into question Beeston's initial purpose as a castle, that being a fortified residence of its lord, it is notable that throughout the medieval period, it was named consistently as *Castellum de Rupe*, the Castle of the Rock (Ill.II.2).

As regards Beeston's military architectural features, none of these was entirely new. Although Allen Brown cites Beeston and Bolingbroke as the way forward in castle design in the early thirteenth century (Allen Brown 1984, 7), the latter being a contemporary castle built by Ranulf de Blundeville, McNeill states that it is in four castles of the 1220s that we can see what was to become the ideal in England, the additional two being at Kenilworth and Montgomery (McNeill 1992, 94). Kenilworth is, in fact, a castle dating to about fifty years after the Conquest, and it is presumed that McNeill refers to later building or rebuilding. Notably, however, Montgomery dates to 1223 and was built by a newly crowned Henry III. Although slightly earlier than Ranulf's castles, including that of Beeston, with Ranulf's recently gained influence from the Holy Land, it is tempting to suggest that

Ill.II.2: Beeston castle, Cheshire: Double gatehouse to Inner Bailey, taken from the Outer Bailey. (Photograph by author)

Ill.II.3: Beeston castle *c.*1950. © English Heritage NMR

Henry was inspired by Ranulf's plans. Certainly, the coincidence is interesting, particularly in view of the current speculation as to the men's political relationship at this time, discussed below. As with Montgomery, the importance of Beeston is that for the first time, the strength of the castle's fortifications rested entirely on the gatehouses and mural towers, and the gatehouse appeared in a fully developed form, playing a major role in the defence and residence of the castle. Thus, Beeston castle represents a newly established phase of castle building, during which the medieval castle reached its *apogée*. Such an architectural form as evidenced at Beeston and Ranulf's other two castles at Bolingbroke, Lincolnshire, and Chartley, Staffordshire, discussed below, culminated with Edward I's Beaumaris, which provided both the ultimate military strong point and the best residential accommodation.

The design of Beeston castle suggests the actual, or potential, fulfillment of any defensive, judicial, social, economic and prestigious purposes. Its residential role was, perhaps, intended to be wider. Clearly, Beeston did not play a colonisation role due to its remoteness. The medieval castle represents a complex balance between the site, the need for defence or the show of it, and accommodation. Indeed, 'Castles were not only splendid buildings in their own right but they were the self-conscious frames for the lives of their builders' (McNeill 1992, 30). Beeston castle appears to be no exception, for even in its incomplete state of construction, outwardly and visually the castle was a striking symbol of lordship, which dominated the surrounding landscape. Occupying a highly visible, prominent location, Beeston castle stands majestically on a sheer rocky crag with commanding panoramas of eight counties, from the Pennines to the Welsh mountains (Ill.II.3).

Castles in Context

In recent years, castles and their landscapes have begun to receive attention from a number of scholars. Charles Coulson's papers on castle building significantly re-examined the

physical evidence of castles themselves and suggested the possibility of an alternative purpose of castle building, where 'the functionalism inherent in a fortified feature cannot be disentangled from their evocative purpose' (Coulson 1979, 74, 77). Groundbreaking research has been carried out on castles and their landscapes, such as Michael Hughes' study based in Hampshire (Hughes 1989, 27–60), at Bodiam (Coulson 1992, 51–107), at Ludgershall (Everson, Brown and Stocker 2000, 97–119) and Robert Liddiard's study of medieval castles in Norfolk (Liddiard 2000). Importantly, Paul Everson believes that progress in the field of castle studies has brought about the growing realisation that castle buildings are not just (or even sometimes not at all) military structures, and that their primary meanings may be to do with landscape and other symbolism, an interpretation raised by Stocker in 1993 (Everson 1998, 32–38). C C Taylor, discussing Shotwick Castle in Cheshire, suggests that the symbolism and imagery provided by the immediate landscape setting of the castle was perhaps more important than previous site studies have suggested (Taylor 2000, 38–55).

The last decade, in particular, has seen a consolidation of this huge shift in interpretations of the purpose of the castle, the re-evaluation of which is summarised by Robert Liddiard (2005) and Matthew Johnson (2002), who both argued that castles were built in relation to the identities of the people who used them. Creighton states that the castle was a symbol of social status, and not simply a military phenomenon; that castles should be viewed as part of a social landscape, and that the status and authority in the landscape should be examined (2002). Abigail Wheatley (2004) concludes that the castle incorporates every aspect of medieval consciousness and thus requires an interdisciplinary approach to its study. Lowerre's study of the reasons behind the location of a number of castles in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire considers that strategic reasons for their siting were a possibility, but so too, was the power and authority generally practiced in England at the time (Lowerre, 2005).

However, this broader approach has not been without its criticism: Colin Platt (2007, 83–102) argues that while castles had many other functions, including that of the self-conscious display of their builders, defence remained the first consideration of almost all medieval builders. Such a militaristic re-assertion was countered by Creighton and Liddiard who argue that defence *versus* symbolism debates are detrimental to the subject of castle studies, and the authors call for the development of a distinct, multi-disciplinary research agenda (Creighton and Liddiard 2008, 161–169). Creighton's recent publication on elite landscapes, once again stresses the symbolism of castles, as well as the interrelationships between different components of the landscape, such as dovecotes, fishponds and gardens, all of which displayed poetry, art and intellect, and provided elite appearances (Creighton 2009).

As a result of such on-going research and debate into this area, it is now understood generally, that apart from occasional military activity, most castles were used less for military purposes, and more for administration and display as the lords' residences. On this interpretation, the castle signified the status of its builder, enhanced by ostentatious display through use of seemingly designed landscapes to improve the visual setting of the castle, such as ornamental gardens, parks and masonry-reflecting pools.

Power in the Landscape: The Broader Perspective.

Beeston castle's existence owes itself to an immensely powerful individual. Ranulf de Blundeville was, for much of his life, the most important and powerful magnate of England (Alexander 1983, ix). The source of Ranulf's strength 'lay not in Chester, but in the immense territorial power he had built up […] across the length and breadth of central England' (Barraclough quoted in Ellis, 1993, 94), where Ranulf's interest lay principally in the 'great triangle of land whose northern baseline extended from Chester in the west to Lincoln in the east, and whose apex lay to the south at Coventry' (Thacker 1991, 11).

To what extent, if at all, Ranulf's power affected the immediate landscape and settlement pattern with its agglomerated village at Beeston and dispersed farmstead encircling the hill is not clear, and would deserve separate, detailed study. However, evidence exists to indicate that Ranulf's power did affect the landscape under his control. As the problems of population pressure compounded in the thirteenth century, discontent and land-hunger increased. Ranulf made concessions in the eighth clause of his Cheshire Charter of 1215–16, in which he laid down the conditions of land enclosure. He gave his barons the right to assart their lands within the arable area of the forest and grow crops on land formerly cultivated and free from wood without payment (Husain 1973, 72). In addition, Dieulacres Abbey, Staffordshire, founded by Ranulf, cleared land at Pulford, Cheshire, for assarts, and in 1314, there is mention of the newly tilled land here (Aston 1993, 120).

Between 1225 and 1226, there was a series of five agreements between Ranulf and specified groups of freemen, by which the latter quitclaimed to the earl their rights in 500 acres of common pasture in the West Fen of Bolingbroke, Lincolnshire, so that Ranulf could enclose these 'with ditches of a breadth and depth at his pleasure' (Barraclough 1988, 415). Barraclough suggests that this implies an intention to undertake the work of draining the fen on a considerable scale, and, if this was the case, it would appear to contradict the prevailing view that drainage, except in a small, piecemeal way by individual farmers, did not get underway before the close of the fifteenth century.

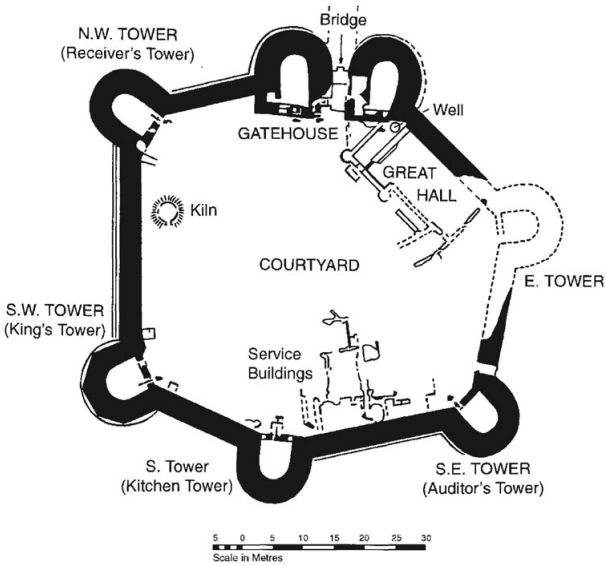
Ranulf's power extended into other landscape features beyond castles. For example, King John granted the castle and manor of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire to Ranulf in 1215, and Ranulf began to lay down the park around 1225 (Alexander 1983, 31). Coss suggests that it was probable that Coventry castle gave way to Ranulf's neighbouring Cheylesmore manor house and park (SP33357865) about this time (Coss 1979, xxxii), which suggests a move from a military focus to that of a more functional and aesthetic one. Further evidence of a non-military designed landscape exists at Chester castle, where in *c.*1199, Ranulf granted to a William Munitor the custody of the earl's garden and orchard. He was also to have his 'resting tree', the purpose of which is speculated, and the remainder of the apples after the first shaking of the trees and the right to make a garden in the castle moat (Barraclough 1988, 304). In addition to the founding of four boroughs: (Frodsham and Macclesfield, both in Cheshire, as well as Leek in Staffordshire and Salford in Lancashire), further evidence of Ranulf's power can be found in his translation of Poulton Abbey, Cheshire (SJ40365836), creating Dieulacres Abbey, Staffordshire (SJ9833 5786) in about 1214, due to frequent incursions of the Welsh.

Beeston Castle, Cheshire Castles and Beyond

Ranulf had control of more than 20 baronial castles at different periods throughout his earldom (Alexander 1983, 114). The only castles believed to have been built by Ranulf, other than Beeston and its two contemporary castles at Bolingbroke and Chartley, were those raised at Deganwy, Caenarfonshire and Holywell, Flintshire. Evidence suggests that these latter two castles were built quickly for military and territorial purposes and on behalf of King John (Alexander 1983, 114; King 1983, 265, respectively).

The main seat of Ranulf's immense power was at Chester castle. Most Cheshire castles at the time were private feudal strongholds, which were domestic and symbolic, acting as links in the chain of authority within Cheshire. The most extensive surviving fortifications are found at Beeston and Halton, and to a lesser extent at Chester, the greater part of this latter castle being a subsequent rebuild. Of the Cheshire castles, only Beeston dates from what most historians and archaeologists regard as the 'later period of castle building' after 1200, when the construction of baronial castles as a whole was in decline (Allen Brown 1959, 249–80).

Three castles were erected or entirely reconstructed in the 1220s by Ranulf, these being Beeston, Bolingbroke in Lincolnshire and Chartley in Staffordshire. All three notably appear to pin down the three corners of Ranulf's great triangle of land representing his most concentrated tenurial interests. At Bolingbroke (TF 3492 6492), Ranulf's power directly affected the landscape. In England, castles were imposed generally on an existing pattern of settlement, rather than resulting in a reorganisation (McNeill 1992, 84). Bolingbroke is an exception, because here the castle was built, interestingly, in the plain below the twelfth century castle site at Dewy Hill. Unlike Beeston, therefore, a completely new site for Bolingbroke castle was chosen. The present church appears to have been re-oriented to face the new site.



III.II.4: Plan of Bolingbroke Castle. © English Heritage NMR

Not only the siting, but also the plan, of Bolingbroke differed drastically from Beeston (Ill.II.4). The castle is hexagonal, with stone-backed mural towers enclosing a courtyard and a surrounding moat. The striking similarities, however, are with the great gatehouse with D-shaped towers and the absence of a keep. Although most of the gatehouse has now disappeared, in Holles' *Lincolnshire Notes, 1634–42*, he described the gatehouse as 'very stately over a fayre drawbridge: The gate house is a very uniforme & strong building' (Holles (1634–42) 1911, 125).

As with Beeston, Bolingbroke is surrounded by a stone wall; that is, it is an enclosure castle (Ill.II.5). This form developed considerably during the twelfth century when defensive experience gained during the Crusades was applied to their design. (National Monument Reference 1994). Enclosure castles such as Bolingbroke are rare nationally, with only 120 recorded examples. Belonging to the highest levels of society, they frequently acted as major administrative centres and formed the *foci* for developing settlement patterns (National Monument Reference 1994). Edward I visited Bolingbroke castle in 1292 and may well

Ill.II.5: Bolingbroke Castle.
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have been influenced by its design (Cooper 1999, 1), although his castle building in Wales had commenced by that date.

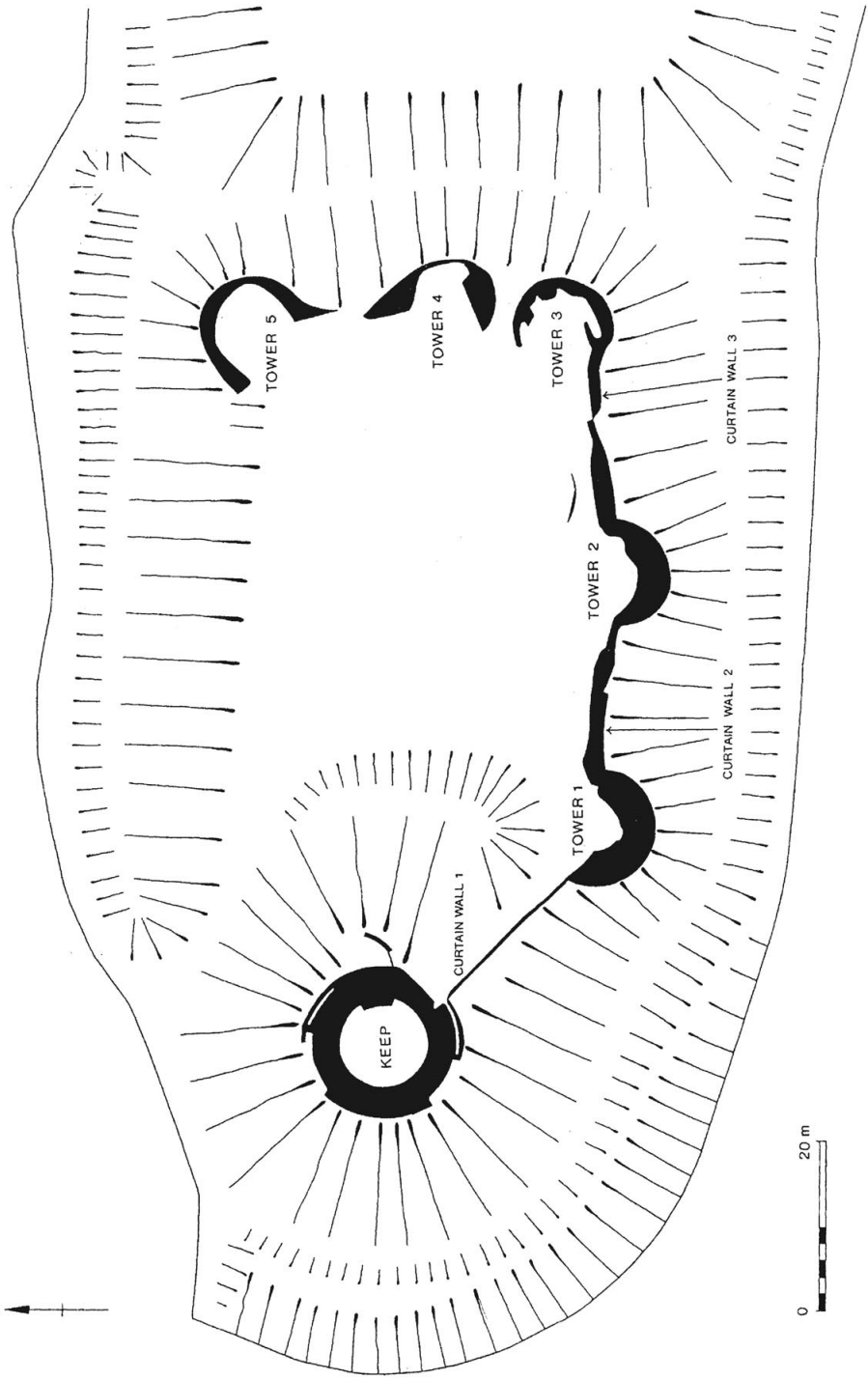
The plan of Beeston was influenced by existing earthworks and by the topography. Similarly, at Chartley Castle, Staffordshire (SK01032849), the layout of Ranulf's stone castle was dictated by previous earthworks, but in this case, it was the existing motte and bailey (Ill.II.6). Chartley was originally constructed during the 1090s and belonged to the Earls of Chester. Once again, the design differs from that of Beeston; the motte was utilised to accommodate a circular keep. However, a similar gatehouse, open-backed towers along the south and east sides, and curtain wall, were all constructed on top of earlier earthworks. Much of the castle has been pulled down and a nineteenth-century folly created on the motte, but two cylindrical towers have been left standing (Ill.II.7). The tower dimensions and form are almost identical with the bases of those revealed by excavation at Bolingbroke (Thompson 1991, 104). The plan of the gateway resembles that of Beeston and Bolingbroke, with a tower either side of a funnelled entrance across a drawbridge (Northamptonshire County Council 1998, 28).

The exact location of the village of Chartley remains unknown. It is believed that one of the factors leading to its desertion would have been the reduction of the garrison to the castle in later years. In addition, land surrounding the castle was established as a deer park, probably during the late thirteenth century (Wilkinson 1998, 4). The castle lies in the Parish of Stowe within a manorial landscape today centred upon the medieval foundation of nearby Chartley Hall, the present occupants of which currently own the castle (Northamptonshire County Council 1998, 12). According to Leland, 'Old yerle Randol, as sum say, lay in [Chartley] when he builded Deul'encres Abbay' (Leland 1549, 24).

Ranulf, Religion and the Landscape

Alexander stated that the earl gave only one grant of property (aside from confirmation) to a Cistercian house other than Dieulacres, Staffordshire, and that this was a grant of land in Macclesfield forest to Combermere for making a grange. Greene, however, mentions that Ranulf had founded the Franciscan Friary in Coventry (Greene 1992, 171). Ranulf had indeed granted a portion of Cheylesmore Park in Coventry to the Greyfriars in 1230 (Stephens 1969, 131–132), and in 1234, four years later, and two years after Ranulf's death, the friars are recorded as using timber from Kenilworth for shingles to cover the roof of what was presumably their first church, which may well have been of wood (Stephens 1969, 131). Whether Ranulf simply granted land to the Greyfriars, or indeed, founded the original timber Franciscan Friary, is not, therefore, clear (Knowles & Hadcock 1971; Eales 2004).

Poulton Abbey was founded in 1153, being a cell of Combermere, Cheshire (SJ541415). In about 1214, although there is speculation as to the exact date, the abbey 'chiefly on account of the frequent incursions of the Welsh' (Lysons 1810, 745), was removed to Dieulacres, Staffordshire, the scant remains of which lie a mile north of Leek in the same county. While the Annals of Dieulacres Abbey ascribe Ranulf's motives to a dream (Alexander 1983, 39), Emery, Gibbins and Matthews suggest that it is also possible that the endowment of a monastery was a precondition for Earl Ranulf's divorce in 1199 (Emery, Gibbins and Matthews 1995, 8).



III.II.6: Plan of Chartley Castle. With kind permission from Northamptonshire County Council

III.II.7: Chartley castle, Staffordshire: View from the southeast. The towers are believed to resemble those that formed part of the castle's gatehouse. (Image courtesy of Northamptonshire Archaeology)

The twelfth century saw the climax in this country of monastic foundations. Thereafter, as Thompson remarks, those associated with castles almost cease, suggesting that in the thirteenth century, piety perhaps found expression in the promotion of friaries, as well as, to some extent, a decline in castle building itself (Thompson 1986, 307). Indeed, according to Thompson's list, only one Cistercian monastery linked to a castle was founded in the thirteenth century and this was also, tentatively, associated with Chartley castle, that being Dieulacres. The Cistercian house had mainly fallen out of favour by the thirteenth century.

Dieulacres Abbey acquired large estates in the area and exploited what had been large areas of barren moorland for wool production. The abbey had a considerable impact on the local population as landlords and employers, and the abbey would have affected many people's lives in and around Leek (Klemperer 1995, 2). Dieulacres continued to acquire land in Cheshire after 1214. The principal estate was centred on the old abbey site at Poulton, where there were 900 acres of arable land. Close by were granges of Dodleston and Churton, and the abbey also owned salt-pits at Nantwich and Middlewich, Cheshire (Fisher 1984, 28).

The Significance of Beeston Castle

Since all three of Ranulf's castles were built about 1225, it would seem logical to view Beeston as only part of a more complete picture. The castles built prior to Ranulf's Crusader voyage in 1218 were built for King John for primarily military reasons during the territorial wars on the border between England and Wales. From the details available, these castles cannot be compared in any way to Ranulf's own castles, built after returning from the Fifth Crusade in spring 1220 (Eales 2004, 58). Indeed, neither Holywell nor Deganwy were constructed in a manner that survives even in ruins, the latter having been reconstructed following further skirmishes. That Beeston castle was built to protect the English border from Welsh raids does not carry weight. Ranulf's alliance with Llywelyn the Great from 1218 ensured that the northern part of the English border was not at threat (Carpenter 2004, 323). Indeed, the castle is located east of Chester and away from the border, its gateway facing towards England, not Wales. If a purpose of defence for Beeston castle is presumed, we must look elsewhere.

It cannot be insignificant that Ranulf appeared to plan his castles on return from the Crusade in 1220. Pennant, writing in 1782, stated that Chartley castle was *built* 'in 1220 (…) and to defray the experiences of this, as also of Beeston, (…) a tax was levied on all his vassals' (Pennant 1782, 90). This statement is supported by Ranulf Higden (*c.*1280–*c.*1363), a monk of Chester, who wrote that Chartley and Beeston castles and Dieulacres Abbey, were all paid for by a tax levied in 1220 throughout Ranulf's lands (Lumby 1882, 198). This discrepancy of dates does not allow for the amassing of taxes prior to commencing the building. However, the impression is given that Ranulf was keen to build his castles on his return. In addition, it has been stated that Ranulf returned to his home in Staffordshire in 1221, when he founded Dieulacres Abbey in that year (Dent (1896) 1975, 78). Matthews, having worked on the Poulton chapel excavation and relevant documentation, confirms that there is, in fact, an unresolved discrepancy as to the actual date of the Abbey's translation (Matthews 2000, *pers. comm.*) and that the generally- accepted date of 1214, is far from firm.

In order to establish whether or not there were any internal political reasons for Ranulf's three castles being planned, and, therefore, with a military purpose being paramount, the known events at that time must be examined. After King John's death in 1216, and during the minority of Henry III, Ranulf exercised a major political role. Beal-Browell and others speculate that following his return from the Crusade in 1220, Ranulf's power decreased, along with every piece of political ground he had gone away with; Hubert de Burgh (*c.*1170–1243) was supreme, and Ranulf had 'thus lost the chance of succeeding to the regency himself'

(Beal-Browell 1908, 731). Thus, Ranulf's reputation following his successful leadership during the Crusade was at an all-time high, but his influence was at an all-time low (Soden, pers. comm.) and he was considered a threat to royal authority. Between 1220 and 1223, Hugh de Burgh recovered royal lands and offices, and Ranulf was also instructed to yield his castles to the crown. Ranulf, Gilbert of Gloucester and the Count of Aumale were all said to have 'strongly and futilely objected, unable even to speak with the King' (Alexander 1983, 87). However, Ranulf and his following did peacefully and loyally surrender their royal castles and custodies to the king, being careful not to annoy de Burgh, and after being assured that the royal policy would apply to all and respect everyone's interests.

The building of Beeston castle could well have arisen as part of a careful, but hasty, consolidation of property and lands, as well as a show of strength in reaction to these political events. Alexander believed that this could be supported by the fact that the earl did not attest royal charters between 23 October 1223 and 25 February 1224, and by his apparent withdrawal from national politics from January 1224 until the summer of 1227 (Alexander 1983, 93). Although we do not have enough evidence to dispute this, the suggestion must be weighed against other factors. For instance, as Alexander himself stated, 'one of the dominating principles of Ranulf's entire public career was loyalty to his sovereign' (Alexander 1983, 11). Indeed, personal success must have depended on the cooperation with the king and only a handful could have built castles with political dissatisfaction in mind. Notably, in 1221, Fulk Fitz Warin III was granted limited authority to strengthen the border castle of Whittington and Ranulf was asked by the king to ensure that Whittington castle 'be made not stronger than was necessary as against the Welsh' or stronger than it was before the Barons' War (Whittington Castle Preservation Trust 2003, 7). The rebuilding of the castle in the 1220s was evidently on a much more substantial scale than previously, with the inclusion of a stone keep, curtain walls, towers and a gatehouse, interestingly of similar design to that at Beeston castle. Such authority and freedom of build and design, as well as the fact that Ranulf appears to have been planning his castles from 1220, is significant when examining the purpose of Beeston castle. Indeed, despite the obvious political rumblings, Ranulf does not appear to have fallen from Henry's favour. Although royal grants of land were both sparse and small, there were exceptions, an example being in 1230, when Henry granted Ranulf all the royal demesne in Lancashire between the rivers Ribble and Mersey: Liverpool and the wapentakes of Salford, West Derby and Leyland (Alexander 1983, 92). Significantly, Ranulf was still building at least one of his castles, Beeston, at that time.

While insecurity may well have played a part in the purpose of Beeston castle, Ranulf 'increasingly in his later years, came to regard himself as possessed of semi-autonomous princely status' (Thacker 1991, 18) evidenced, for example, by the consistent consolidation of his lands in Cheshire and issuing his own Magna Carta of Cheshire (Eales 2004, 57). Indeed, both the Chester annals and Lucian, a monk of St. Werburgh's Abbey in Chester, writing in the 1190s, call the earl a 'prince' [*princeps*] (Eales 2004, 57). While it is argued that Ranulf 'undoubtedly […] sought independence from royal control' (Thacker 1991, 18), and that comital charters indicate a 'distinctive regional autonomy' in Cheshire under king John (Eales 2004, 57). Equally, it is argued that this independence was sought with the king's approval. Between 1205 –15, 'both king and earl seem to have concluded

that it was in their own interests to treat Cheshire as a special case; this was one reason for Ranulf's loyalism' (Eales 2004, 57).

While there is a question over the date of Dieulacres Abbey's foundation, Ranulf's castle building and that of Cheylesmore Manor, the deer park he laid in Newcastle under Lyme, the overview of the building of Whittington castle, as well as other building work at Braybrooke castle, Northamptonshire, the hall at Wallingford castle and the barbican at Bridgenorth (Soden 2009), all of which are believed to have commenced around 1225, is perhaps indicative of Ranulf using his power to consolidate his position. Thacker puts forward the suggestion that Ranulf's 'acquisitiveness in his later years was prompted by a desire to preserve his Chester earldom from dismemberment' (Thacker 1991, 16). By 1215, Ranulf had been married fifteen years to his second wife and had still produced no children. In 1220, he had taken custody of his nephew, John the Scot, whose father, David, earl of Huntingdon, had died in the previous year. He also had three sisters with descendants' rights, and perhaps Ranulf felt the need to acquire as much land as possible in order to 'provide adequately for his coheirs and transmit his senior earldom intact' (Thacker 1991, 16).

Prior to the building of Beeston, Bolingbroke and Chartley castles, Ranulf had only built previously for King John for defensive reasons, and all other castles and buildings under his control had been inherited or granted. Although the building of baronial castles was on the decline in the thirteenth century (Allen Brown 1959, 249–280), Ranulf brought back the latest castle designs from his travels and had the power and influence to create them for himself and be at the forefront of castle design.

Thompson points out that although strongly defended, the small size of Bolingbroke, and indeed, this applies equally to Chartley, suggests that pleasure played an important part in the motives of construction (Thompson 1991, 104). Bolingbroke could have been placed on Dewy Hill nearby, with better vantage points for defence. However, Ranulf stamped his authority with the latest castle design on the neighbouring village of Bolingbroke, which he restructured. In addition, the potential appears to exist in earthworks at Bolingbroke (Everson 1998, 32–38) and Chartley (Riley 1958) for the ostentatious display of using ornamental gardens and landscapes. As outlined above, evidence exists elsewhere of Ranulf's power to manipulate the landscape symbolically and aesthetically, at and around this time of political flux. However, there are dangers in taking this too far:

> Despite the trend to downplay the castle's role in war, it should also be remembered that one of the most potent metaphors of castle architecture was that of warfare. Building a residence in a particularly overt martial style could be an excellent way in which to display potential physical power — indeed, the message of a grand crenellated building was by definition inherently militaristic. Where there was a close approximation between the actual effectiveness of military architecture and residential needs this was a powerful political statement on the part of the builder. For example, Beeston was a clear assertion of magnatial power by the Earls of Chester in the early years of the minority of Henry III (Liddiard 2005, 147).

Conclusion

While Ranulf did not manipulate Beeston castle's landscape to any obvious extent, its hilltop isolation within the Cheshire plain ensured its masterful domination of it. Beeston castle was indeed intended as a power statement. It is suggested, therefore, that while Ranulf's motives are not clear, his castles played a key role in empire building, and were thus structures full of symbolism, designed to represent him as a strong and powerful man; a man who was master of all he surveyed and whose wealth knew no bounds. Ranulf de Blundeville's power impacted on that large proportion of the medieval English landscape, which he controlled to such an extent, that evidence embodying that power remains to this day. Beeston castle is indicative of that power, but is only part of it. It is only by placing Beeston castle within the broader picture, therefore, that this powerful focus can hope to be understood.

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